

7-1-2010

## Teaching Reading Comprehension to Children of Poverty

Kena Price

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Price, Kena (2010) "Teaching Reading Comprehension to Children of Poverty," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 42.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss3/42>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.

# Academic Leadership Journal

In 2007 18% of children in the United States were living in poverty, and 12.5% of the entire population lived in poverty, which amounts to 37.3 million people (US Census Bureau Poverty 2007). To be considered actually living in poverty, not just poor, a single person home had to report an annual income of \$10,590 or less, while a home with four people residing in it needed to report \$21,203 annual salary (US Census Bureau Poverty Thresholds). These statistics demonstrate the overwhelming need for teachers to know how to best teach students coming from poverty. Almost 20% of our students live in actual poverty, which indicates that a substantial portion of our students must be living in homes that struggle financially. It would be irresponsible not to address the different learning needs of poor students.

Both Payne (2005) and Pellino (2007) agree that when working with students of poverty, the focus must be on the learning that is taking place, instead of the focus being on the teaching taking place. One of the main problems for students coming from poverty is that they have different schema than the students who have been considered more “mainstream;” there are different societal norms and rules that these students are accustomed to (Pellino, 2007). Pellino (2007) also claims that constructivist ideals should be followed with children from poverty, because it allows them to draw on the knowledge they do have in order to be active learners through questioning, hypothesizing, and drawing conclusions. Payne (2005) doesn’t disagree, but is more specific in pointing out that children from poverty truly lack some cognitive strategies that most children are assumed to have. Payne recommends using three stages in the learning process: input strategies to deal with the quality and quantity of information that is gathered, elaboration strategies to help with how the information is used, and output strategies to help with how the information gained is communicated to others (2005).

Payne (2005) breaks down the input strategy into specific cognitive processes that should be taught to students living in poverty. She claims that students from poverty need to be explicitly taught how to use planning behaviors (like goal-setting, assigning time to the task, identifying parts of the task), how to control impulsivity and stop and think before doing, how to use appropriate and accurate labels (which then gives the students the tools to be able to engage in metacognition), how to explore data systematically (numbering and highlighting are both useful to help a child from poverty learn how to do this). There are more elements to the first input strategy, but they all amount to explicitly teaching children from poverty how to go about thinking and organizing their thinking. Payne (2005) claims that it is the input strategy that is often ignored in schools. Instead, teachers focus on the elaboration and output strategies, because this is where teaching occurs. So when we ask students to summarize what they have read, we are asking them to elaborate (use the words that were read in order to make judgments about the story), and output (communicating the use of the information to the teacher). According to Payne (2005), when a student fails at a task teachers often re-teach the elaboration steps and the output process, but still don’t teach the input strategies. It’s easy to see how a student who doesn’t understand how to organize ideas is incapable of summarizing a story when we just keep saying, “Find the main ideas.” It’s not that he/she isn’t trying, it’s that he/she truly doesn’t understand the cognitive process necessary in order to do this.

Walker-Dalhouse and Risko (2008) add to the discussion by pointing out that teachers can help the unengaged, disruptive children of poverty become active participants in learning through modeling genuine caring and ensuring that the classroom is a safe place. This allows the students of poverty to relax and become open to learning in a way that they are not if they don't feel safe and cared for. Walker-Dalhouse and Risko (2008) also add to the litany of evidence stating that students from poverty must be taught to draw connections between their own experiences and the material being taught in order for them to be successful.

In reading education for all students, it is hotly debated whether whole language or phonics instruction is more successful. This is applicable to teaching children from poverty, especially with the widespread agreement that explicit instruction in skills is necessary. The National Reading Panel (NRP) is clear that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension is beneficial to students in order to improve their reading ability (NICHD, 2000). However, the NRP does not claim that any one element is sufficient all by itself. In this paper I am focusing on comprehension skills, and the NRP is in agreement with many of the other authors already cited. The NRP reports that formal and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies is effective at enhancing the understanding students gain from reading (NICHD, 2000). The NRP's review of the available research also illustrates that comprehension is improved when students connect the reading to their own ideas and knowledge (NICHD, 2000). This is in complete agreement with the claims of Pellino, Payne, and Walker-Dalhouse and Risko.

Despite the evidence that explicit instruction in reading skills is effective, there are many critics who are violently opposed to allowing skills instruction to replace the time available for actual reading of books. Cummins (2007) asserts that lower-income students are less likely to have opportunities to read extensively in class. This would be because the classes they are in are focusing on skills like phonemic awareness and phonics, and then there is limited time, so reading real books gets shoved to the side. Cummins (2007) cites a study that demonstrated that low-income readers who were "engaged readers" greatly outscored students who came from backgrounds with more education and higher income but were less engaged readers. So it would seem that one of the best ways to improve the reading ability of students is to help them interact with the text more and learn to enjoy their reading.

In a study conducted by Margaret Dermody, Ph.D., a mixture of skills instruction and holistic methodologies in reading trade books was attempted. The study was conducted in a low-income area of New Orleans, and 90% of the students were already below grade level (Dermody, 2001). The method being tested was that a specific skill was embedded in a lesson over a literature selection (Dermody, 2001). The students were taught in a "whole-part-whole" sequence throughout the semester, and by the end were reported as being more engaged during the literacy task and participating more in the lessons (Dermody, 2001). Comprehension development increased in the students in the treatment group, and students in the treatment group were also more active participants in their learning and were more motivated to read when they were using "real books" (Dermody, 2001). The results of this study support the claims of the NRP and Cummins. Both Cummins and the NRP advocate teaching using real texts that students can engage with, but also teaching skills that are necessary to be able to understand the reading.

Project Athena is another study that was conducted to determine what works when teaching children of poverty in the areas of reading comprehension, literary analysis, and persuasive writing (VanTassel-

Baska & Stambaugh, 2006).

According to VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, each lesson that was conducted would

incorporate the following components: (a) a multicultural literary selection, usually a poem or short story; (b) a literature web that asks students to identify key words, feelings, ideas, images, and the structure of the literary piece read; (c) a set of questions to probe student understanding of the literature at a deeper level; and (d) a related writing assignment to encourage metacognitive reflection on the reading. (p. 60)

Project Athena's two year findings included the results that the experimental students did significantly better than the control group in critical thinking and comprehension, and all ability groups and ethnic groups showed significant growth (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006). So once again, VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh seem to be in agreement with both the NRP and Cummins in that skills must necessarily be explicitly taught, but this should be done in the context of "real" reading in order to help students attain higher-order thinking and reading skills.

Keene and Zimmerman (1997) advocate a workshop type method to teaching seven basic skills that metacognitive readers use as they read. The first basic skill they recommend is that readers must activate their prior knowledge (schema) before they read, while they read, and after they read. Payne (2005) agrees that students must be taught to activate schema, and would add that explicitly teaching students both the term schema (in order to give the students the correct labels to facilitate metacognition) and helping them focus on specific stimulus will help students in poverty to be ready to proceed to the elaboration stage. Metacognition is critical to reading, because without being able to understand what they are thinking, students will never be able to truly interact with the reading. Proficient readers use metacognition to be aware of whether or not they are understanding what they are reading, they use it to identify which parts of the reading are incomprehensible and decide whether to read on or reread portions, they use it to identify which ideas or themes are confusing and determine how to solve the problems, they determine a purpose for reading and use metacognition to help determine which parts are critical to comprehend, and they use it simply to know when and how to pause and reconsider what is read in order to enhance their understanding (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). All of this shows that it is necessary for students to be capable of metacognition in order to be capable of comprehending what is read, and according to Payne (2005) and Pellino (2007), metacognition is precisely what children from poverty need assistance in learning how to accomplish.

Keene and Zimmerman (1997) consistently teach all areas of reading comprehension through the teacher first modeling the strategy. In activating background knowledge, the teacher would first do extensive modeling of how she looks at a book, reads the back, thinks of other books by the author, thinks of other books read on the same subject, and then begins to read. Because the students were allowed to first see the teacher going through the process, it gives them clues as to HOW they should begin to think about what they read. This would be an example of an input strategy of focusing on specific stimulus and organizing data (Payne, 2005). Keene and Zimmerman (1997) also give the appropriate label for schema, and discuss with the students both how and why to use it in the modeling stage, which would again address the need for instruction in the input strategy advocated by Payne and assist students from poverty with requiring the appropriate terms, also advocated by Payne (2005). After the teacher has done enough modeling that the students understand, then the students would be separated into small groups so that they could practice together with the teacher assisting them in

sharing connections, then finally end with the students just sharing connections on their own (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). This gradual release allows the students to observe, practice a skill with the safety net of working together, and then finally progress to individual success, which is part of making the class a safe environment for students from poverty, which is advocated by Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, (2008). Keene and Zimmerman (1997) do stress that schema includes things like addressing the text structure, or what is already known about an author, plus recognizing when the background knowledge is not sufficient. This concurs with one of the seven most scientifically based reading comprehension strategies supported by the NRP. The NRP states that teaching students to use the structure of a story will help them to remember it better (NICHD, 2000).

The second cognitive strategy proposed by Keene and Zimmerman (1997) is deciding which ideas and themes in a text are most important. This is done at three levels: determining important words, determining important sentences, and determining what is important in the entire text. At the word level, students are taught to find the words that carry the meaning of the entire sentence, without which there is no logical idea (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Many readers make the mistake of thinking that just because something is remembered, then it must be important, but proficient readers learn that it is the purpose for the reading that determines what is important (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). If the reader is trying to discover what is the main diet of tigers, the important information is far different than if the reader is reading a story to see if the main character will escape without being eaten by the tiger! Keene and Zimmerman (1997) still advocate the gradual release of responsibility model, but add that pointing out non-examples will help the readers to learn to distinguish importance with more accuracy.

Questioning is the third cognitive strategy proposed by Keene and Zimmerman (1997). The NRP lists two different types of questions as two of the seven most scientifically based reading comprehension strategies. One is students answering teachers' higher order questions about the reading and receiving immediate feedback, and the second is students being encouraged to ask themselves questions about the story (NICHD, 2000). Not surprisingly, Keene and Zimmerman focus on the questions students ask themselves. The teacher asking the students questions is not eliminated, but much of the teaching of questioning is done instead by the teacher modeling the questions she asks herself before, during, and after reading (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The teacher would model questions that help her clarify meaning, predict, speculate on author's intent, and focus her attention on important components of the text (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The need for modeling of questions is intense, and is often the most difficult modeling for teachers to do. Good readers question before, during, and after reading naturally, without having to consciously remind themselves to ask questions. This is what makes the modeling so difficult, because often teachers are not aware of the questions they are asking themselves. Without modeling, and even reading conferences to help students use questioning, it is unlikely that students will learn how to use questions to aid in their own comprehension. And without questioning the reading, it is unlikely that students will understand what is read (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). It is the struggling readers who tend not to take the time to ask questions as they read (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Teachers often notice that a student can read an entire book, and still not know what they read. Often teachers assume that the student wasn't reading, when in reality the student was probably just not able to ask him or herself questions in order to make sense of what was read. This inability is what gets us the students who can read the words, but can't make sense of them.

Creating both visual and sensory images is the fourth cognitive strategy. Proficient readers are able to

both remember and respond to what they read with more emotion and involvement because they can use imagery to make it seem real. But again, poor readers do not do this. Part of this is probably due to the lack of opportunity for creativity and imagination when the student from poverty does not even feel safe. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) once again recommend teacher modeling of how she uses all of her senses as well as her emotions to create an image that she can almost feel as she reads. It is also recommended that the teachers model how proficient readers will modify the image as they read, updating it as things in the text change (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). In the gradual release of responsibility trend, Keene and Zimmerman (1997) do also state that it is helpful to students to be partnered and model for each other the images they “see” before they are asked to do it on their own.

The fifth strategy proposed by Keene and Zimmerman (1997) is to teach students to draw inferences from the text. Again, this is a difficult concept for students to grasp, especially those students who come from poverty. Once again, we can refer to Payne (2005) to see that students from poverty need help with the input stage. When we ask a student to infer meaning from the text, we should begin by helping them with the input stage. If a teacher were to use the modeling that is recommended by Keene and Zimmerman (1997), then that would help the students from poverty to see what data should be focused on, and what prior experiences can be activated to help draw inferences. According to Keene and Zimmerman (1997), inferring is a tool that proficient readers use to go beyond what is written and use prior knowledge (schema) to draw conclusions. But it is also more than just drawing conclusions. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) add that proficient readers infer, which includes making reasonable predictions and revising them, creating interpretations of the text and revising them, use a combination of schema and text to answer questions as they read, make connections with the text by drawing on their beliefs and knowledge, and make critical and analytical judgments about what they read. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) state that “inferences result in the creation of personal meaning.” It is this that helps students to truly understand what they read and remember it. Without inferring about the text, they are really just reading the words. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) once again advocate using modeling to teach students how to infer. The teacher should read a text aloud, and think aloud in order to show at what points they make inferences and what type of inferences they make, then the students from poverty can learn from her example. When a teacher just assigns students the task of inferring from the reading, it is impossible to do for a student who doesn’t understand how to focus on and process information.

Bloom’s Taxonomy encourages teachers to get students doing some higher level thinking, and Keene and Zimmerman clearly agree. The sixth comprehension strategy they recommend is to summarize and synthesize. They distinguish between the two by defining a summary as the listing of parts, and a synthesis as the creating of a new whole (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). They suggest that teaching summary is a good place to begin, but synthesis is more than this, and as such is naturally both more meaningful and more difficult. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) point out that synthesis is not accidental, it is the result of all the other comprehension strategies combined, and they add that proficient readers purposefully synthesize in order to help them understand what they are reading. One way proficient readers use synthesis more purposefully is that they pay explicit attention to the elements of literature (characters, setting, conflict, sequence, etc.) and patterns (description, chronological, cause & effect, etc.) and use these patterns to help guide their comprehension of the text (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Proficient readers use synthesis as they read to continuously evaluate relevant themes and ideas, and to revise their opinions about those ideas and themes as new information is presented (Keene & Zimmerman). Because synthesis is so important to do during reading, it becomes imperative

that teachers model for the students from poverty what synthesis-as-you-go looks like. Synthesis is critically important to be able to truly understand the reading, and it would fall into the elaboration strategy described by Payne (2005). Because it is in that elaboration stage, it clearly falls into the area that students from poverty have difficulty with because they do not have enough cognitive ability in the input stage. So for our students of poverty to have any chance at using synthesis, a critical skill in comprehension, we must first show them HOW, including the very basics of what to look for, how to use it, what to think about, etc. We must always keep in mind that students from poverty are unlikely to read and discuss books at home, so they truly do not have the skills to go about doing it in the classroom.

The seventh cognitive strategy recommended by Keene and Zimmerman (1997) does not really stand alone; it is that students must be taught to “fix-up” (p. 23) their reading comprehension when it breaks down. This is one of the most metacognitive of all the strategies, because in order for students to be able to do this, they must think about what they are thinking, be able to recognize when they don’t understand, and then find a strategy to help themselves be able to understand what is read. It is incredibly difficult to do, especially for poor readers who have become so accustomed to not understanding what is read that just reading along without comprehension has become normal, so it does not grab their attention when they read something that makes no sense to them. Keene & Zimmerman (1997) basically advocate that we teach students that reading is hard work, and when they don’t understand something they must stop and try all the strategies in their bag of tricks until they find something that helps them understand what the author is trying to say, then they should go on.

The NRP also promotes seven categories of text comprehension that have the most scientific basis to conclude that they will improve reading comprehension. In summary, they are: comprehension monitoring (teaching students to be aware of their understanding), cooperative learning, use of graphic organizers, students answering teachers’ questions with immediate feedback, students generating their own questions about the reading, learning story structure as a means of aiding comprehension and retention, and summarization (where students are taught to integrate ideas and generalize from what is read) (NICHD, 2000). Several of these are obviously in direct agreement with Keene and Zimmerman. Comprehension monitoring in the NRP report is the third, sixth, and seventh strategy in Keene and Zimmerman. Cooperative learning (from NRP report) is not specifically called for in Keene and Zimmerman, but this is part of the reader’s workshop; as they teach each new strategy the teacher is expected to model it, then have the groups do it together, then students do it alone (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), which is clearly cooperative. Generating their own question (from NRP report) is quite clearly strategy three in Keene and Zimmerman. Using story structure (from NRP report) is part of the first, second, fifth, sixth, and seventh strategies in Keene and Zimmerman. Summarization (from the NRP report) is explicitly asked for as a beginning step to strategy six in Keene and Zimmerman.

So the only two strategies that the NRP report found to be based upon solid science that were not openly advocated by Keene and Zimmerman were the use of graphic organizers and students answering the questions put forth by the teacher. And it is a fair assumption to make that during the “we do” stage of the gradual release of responsibility the teacher would probably be asking questions of the struggling readers. Keene and Zimmerman do not ever explicitly call for graphic organizers, but they do seem to understand the need to place ideas down in a concrete fashion, because much of the readers’ workshop is done with students putting their own questions on huge papers, and students posting their own ideas for activating schema for a book (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). So while the two do have a disparity, it is clear that both have an understanding that some sort of graphic display is beneficial to all

students. The readers' workshops would probably be even more beneficial to students from poverty if graphic organizers were incorporated, because as Payne (2005) states, part of the input strategies that students from poverty need help with is learning how to organize information and ideas. It seems that adding graphic organizers would not be detrimental to the design of readers' workshops, and it would be very helpful to students from poverty.

There are several basic points that all the researchers agree on for students living in poverty. They all agree that the students must feel safe in the classroom. If that doesn't occur, then it is entirely impossible for the student to learn. Pellino (2007) even goes so far as to say that it is physically impossible for a student of poverty to learn unless their basic needs are met first. Second, Payne (2005), VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2006), Dermody (2001), and the NRP report (NICHD, 2000) all agree that students from poverty must be explicitly taught how to think about reading. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) have offered a very comprehensive method to teach students the specific skills they will need to use in order to understand what is read. Through their extensive use of modeling, they provide the necessary scaffolding for the students of poverty to learn the actual cognitive steps necessary to progress to being able to be successful on their own.

It is my opinion that Keene and Zimmerman offer a very complete method to teach comprehension that will be effective for students of poverty. If teachers will take the time to focus on the reading strategies they outline, and model them extensively, then all readers, but especially students coming from poverty, will improve in reading comprehension. As I contemplate beginning a new year with new students, it is my intention to teach all of my students how to use these specific strategies. One concern that arises is that for the student who is already a proficient reader, and who already uses these strategies unconsciously, is this a waste of time? The reasons I believe it is not is that first, even our proficient readers need to be aware of what they are doing as they understand what they read, then when they encounter a piece that is more difficult they will be able to consciously use strategies to aid in understanding. Second, I believe that through becoming more cognizant of these skills, they will begin to interact with the reading even more, thereby comprehending even more. Third, even proficient readers often do not truly read as in-depth as Keene and Zimmerman's method demands. If those proficient readers learn to do more questioning and synthesizing, then they will begin to truly delve into what is read and enjoy the experience of questioning the author, thinking about what it says about the world, analyze it with friends and family, all the things that really help reading to be a learning experience. I am excited to see the depth with which I believe my students will begin to see in the novels they read, and I can't wait to see literature circles that take what they have learned from readers' workshops and truly run with a book and enjoy analyzing it and arguing over it!

## References

Cummins, J. (2007). Pedagogies for the poor? realigning reading instruction for low-income students with scientifically based reading research. *Educational Researcher* 36; 564.

doi: 10.3102/0013189X07313156

Dermody, Ph.D. M. (Spr 2001). Analysis of embedded skills lessons for literacy groups with inner city title 1 second grade students. *Reading Improvement*, 38 no1. Retrieved April



4, 2009 from Wilson Web.

Keene, E. O., & Zimmerman, S. (1997). Mosaic of thought: Teaching comprehension in a reader's workshop. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Findings and determinations of the national reading panel by topic areas [data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/findings.cfm>

Payne, Ph.D. R. K. (2005). A framework for understanding poverty: Fourth revised edition. Highlands, TX: aha! Process Inc.

Pellino, K. M. (2007). The effects of poverty on teaching and learning. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from <http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/teaching/poverty/print.htm>

United States Census Bureau. Poverty: 2007 highlights [data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty07/pov07hi.html>

United States Census Bureau. Poverty thresholds for 2007 by size of family and number of related children under 18 years [data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh07.html>

VanTassel-Baska, J. & Stambaugh, T (2006). Project athena: a pathway to advanced literacy development for children of poverty. Gifted Child Today, 29 no2, 58-63. Retrieved April 4, 2009 from Wilson Web.

Walker-Dalhouse, D. & Risko, V. J. (2008). Homelessness, poverty, and children's literacy development. The Reading Teacher 62(1), 84-86. doi:10.1598/RT.62.1.11

VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]